

## **Using Learners' First Language in EFL Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the attitudes of EFL teachers towards using learners' first language (L1) in their classes. It also considers the frequency and functions of using L1 in EFL classes. A mixed-methods study using questionnaires and follow-up interviews was conducted to collect data from EFL teachers of the preparatory year at a state university in Saudi Arabia. Questionnaires were collected from 104 EFL teachers from countries such as the USA, India, and Pakistan. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of their attitudes towards using L1 in EFL classes. The findings provide insight into teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1. They also show that the EFL teachers use L1 to some extent to serve certain pedagogical functions, such as explaining vocabulary.

**Keywords:** L1 use, EFL classrooms, teaching English

## 1 Introduction

Using learners' first language (L1) is widely avoided in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes (Cook, 2001; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Since the end of the 18th century, a number of well-known English teaching methods have adopted a monolingual approach to language teaching, such as the direct method, audiolingualism, communicative language teaching, and task-based language teaching (Howatt, 1984). The monolingual approach discourages use of L1 through one of three approaches: banning the use of L1 in the classroom, minimizing the use of L1 in the classroom, or maximizing use of the target language (L2) in the classroom (Cook, 2001).

The monolingual approach is supported by Krashen's (1981) theory of second language learning, in which it is argued that when learning foreign languages, people follow basically the same route as they do when they acquire their mother tongue, and hence use of the mother tongue in the learning process should be minimized. Brown (1994) believes that language acquisition is a subconscious activity that can only be achieved via interaction in the L2. Another argument for maximizing L2 use is that successful language acquisition depends on keeping the L2 separate from the L1 because languages form distinct systems (Lado, 1957). The rationale for this is based on transfer theories such as contrastive analysis, whereby various language systems cause negative transfers and impede L2 acquisition (Lado, 1957).

Until recently, the monolingual approach was rarely challenged. This may have been due to several reasons. Most EFL classes used to include students who did not share a single L1, and the teacher did not speak the students' language (Atkinson, 1993). However, there is now a wide range of classes in which this is not the case, and where students and teachers share the same L1. This leads monolingual orthodoxy to lose its appeal, and researchers have begun to find fault with L2-only theories, particularly when the L1 of the students (and sometimes the teacher) is shared (Medgyes, 1994; Auerbach, 1993). In these situations, Medgyes (1994) considers this orthodoxy to be 'untenable on any grounds, be they psychological, linguistic or pedagogical' (p.66), and Auerbach (1993) highlights that there could be positive reasons for using L1 in the classroom for certain purposes.

Many researchers have investigated contexts in which L1 could be used as an aid to L2 teaching (Atkinson, 1993; Aurebach, 1993), including examining the areas in which L1 can be used in a supporting role when learning L2. Classroom management (including discipline, organizing the class and task setting) is one such area; others include translation and checking meaning, understanding grammatical points, language analysis, and code switching (Atkinson, 1993; Aurebach, 1993). Some studies, aside from appearing to demonstrate that L1 use can actually assist L2 learning, have shown that L1 use can also help students in a sociocultural respect. It has been observed that L1 use can create a more cohesive and relaxed classroom environment in which students share language and cultural references with the teacher, which also clearly impacts learning. Bhooth, Azman, and Ismail (2014) highlight that using the L1 during collaborative tasks enhances learners' language proficiency as they move through the zone of proximal development. Copland and Neokleous (2011) also note that L1 use is valuable in one-to-one interaction with the teacher, while Nation (1990) suggests that refusing to allow students to use their shared L1 negatively impacts on them as it makes them feel that their own language is somehow inferior to the L2.

Although L1 use is discouraged in mainstream English language teaching (ELT) methods, a number of studies show that EFL teachers do, in fact, use L1 in the classroom (Cook, 2001;

Hall & Cook, 2013). Nunan and Lamb (1996) state that the avoidance of learner L1 is practically impossible, especially with monolingual students and students with low-level English language proficiency. In fact, according to Cook (2001), teachers who have at least some knowledge of their students' shared mother tongue tend to use L1 in their classroom. However, when EFL teachers use L1, they often experience feelings of guilt (Copland & Neokleous, 2011). At the same time, it has been suggested that EFL teachers find using L1 practical in L2 teaching (Macaro, 2001), and feel that excluding L1 for "exclusion's sake" could hinder students' learning (e.g., Cook, 2001). Studies have revealed that L1 exclusion is unnecessary; that its use can actually promote learning, providing it is used in the correct way; and that instructors actually do use L1 in their classroom (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Hall & Cook, 2013).

Some studies examine EFL teachers' use of learners' L1 and teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1 (Hall & Cook, 2013; McMillan & Rivers, 2011). However, few studies investigate teachers' attitudes towards L1 use in relation to the practical functions of this in the classroom in the context of a Saudi University, in particular in the preparatory year, with a range of native and non-native EFL teachers. A study in such context might provide empirical results about the role of L1 in EFL classrooms. It can also add to our understanding of the extent of using L1 by EFL teachers and students and the attitudes of practising teachers towards L1 use. Therefore, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How frequently do EFL teachers use learners' L1?
2. How frequently do students use their L1 in the EFL classroom?
3. What are teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1?

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants in this study comprised 104 female teachers, who each answered a questionnaire. As shown in Figure 1, the EFL teachers participating in this study were of a number of different nationalities, with the largest group (about 40%) comprising Saudis. The second highest percentage (21.90%) were South Asian teachers from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. About 10% of teachers were from other Arabic countries (Egypt, Tunis, Jordan, Morocco) or the USA. There were also a number of teachers from the UK, South-East Asia, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, and one teacher from Slovakia.

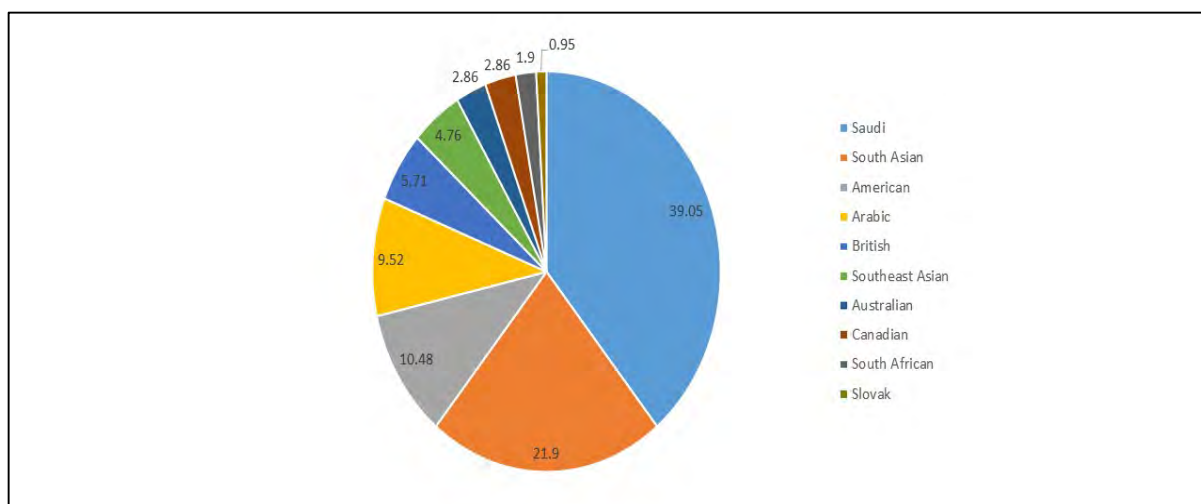


Figure 1: Teacher nationalities (%)

Almost 50% of the EFL teachers were native Arabic speakers, while about 50% were not, as shown in Figure 2.

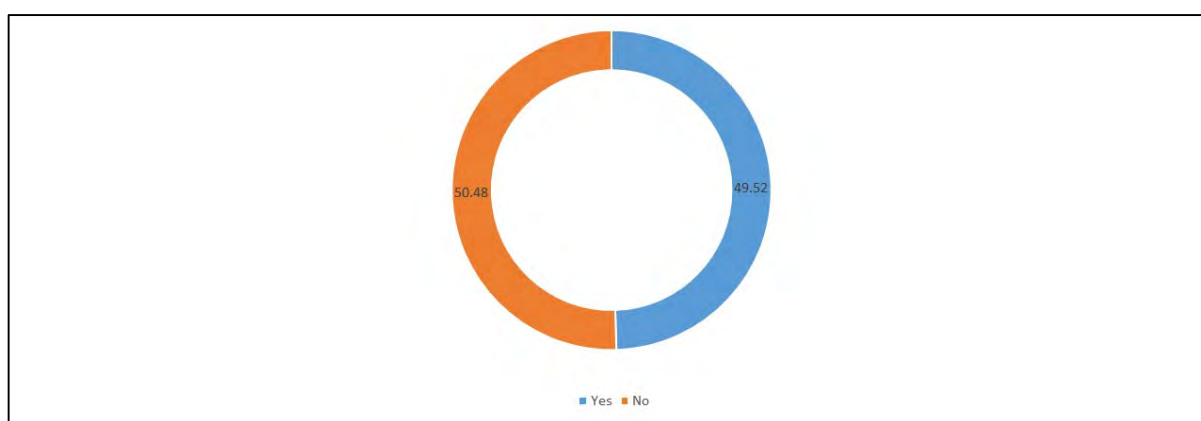


Figure 2: Results in answer to the question "Is Arabic your first language?" (%)

Interviews were also conducted with five of these teachers. The interviewees were chosen to represent a broad range of experience, nationalities, and Arabic language ability. The profile of the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

Code	Years of Experience	Nationality	Level of Spoken Arabic Ability
A	5–9	Australian	Elementary
B	10–14	Pakistani	Elementary
C	25+	Saudi	Native
D	20–24	British	N/A
E	5–9	Saudi	Native

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

The majority of teachers who participated in the study possessed a language-related postgraduate diploma, master's degree, or PhD. They were teaching university-level students,

as the research was conducted at a state university in Saudi Arabia. The sample comprised both native and non-native EFL teachers of the preparatory year, which is the first year of university. One of the main aims of the preparatory year is to improve the English level of students. In order to do this, an intensive general English language course of 18 hours per week is provided. The students' level in English when starting the preparatory year varies, but if they are a beginner at the start of the preparatory year they should reach upper-intermediate level by the end of the year.

## **2.2 Data Collection Procedures**

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to allow for a breadth of information to be obtained and to explore the topic in depth. The 104 participants completed a survey (adopted from Hall & Cook, 2013) online during the spring of 2016. The questionnaire items were designed carefully and it was administered to a large and global sample of English language teachers (Hall & Cook, 2013). To ensure the content reliability and validity of the questionnaire, it was piloted to five English teachers to check the wording and the clarity of its items. After piloting and based on the participants' feedback, some questionnaire items were modified to facilitate clearer understanding, or deleted as they were not related to the context of the study.

The final version of the questionnaire included seven multi-item Likert scale questions, including open questions that gave the participants the opportunity to add further comments, and nine short background questions. Finally, the participants were asked to provide their contact details if they were willing to participate in the follow-up interviews. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire in the pilot study was between 15 and 20 minutes.

The questionnaire investigated teachers' attitudes towards L1 use in the professional context; thus, it should be noted that the data represents reported, rather than actual, L1 use practices. The questionnaire covered attitudes towards the teachers' L1 use in ELT, an evaluation of the arguments for and against this, and the teachers' perceptions of general attitudes towards using L1 in ELT. It also asked about the extent to which the teachers used the learners' L1 in their class and teaching, and for what purposes.

With respect to the follow-up interviews, the main aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' practices of and attitudes towards use of L1 in the EFL classroom. Interview guidelines were developed to address the research questions pertaining to the frequency of using L1, and teachers' attitudes towards using L1 in their teaching. The interviews were semi-structured, individual, recorded, conducted in English, and lasted between 10 and 15 minutes.

Signed informed consent forms were obtained from participants prior to their completion of the questionnaires, and conducting the interviews.

## **2.3 Data Analysis**

To answer the three research questions, the questionnaires were analysed via SPSS 20 software and descriptive statistics were calculated for all questions. The interview data was transcribed and the anonymity of the participants was ensured by coding the interviews with alphabetical letters. The interview transcripts were analysed thematically, because thematic analysis describes the "implicit and explicit ideas within the data" (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011,

p.10). The emergent themes relate to the research questions which examine the frequency of using learners' L1 by EFL teachers, the frequency of using L1 by students in EFL classrooms, and teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1. Excel was used to analyse the qualitative data because it has useful features and commands which help in coding and analysing the interview data such as sorting the data (Hahn, 2008). Hahn's (2008) book about using MS Word and Excel to analyse qualitative data was used as a guide throughout the analysis process.

### 3 Results

In this section, the quantitative and qualitative results for each research question will be provided.

#### 3.1 RQ1: How frequently do EFL teachers use learners' L1?

According to the questionnaire results presented in Figure 3, more than 50% of teachers reported that they never used Arabic in assessing their students, giving feedback, correcting spoken errors, and giving instructions. When examining the results of ALWAYS and OFTEN options, it appears that the teachers did not tend to use L1 much in their EFL classroom for any of the examined functions. However, for the SOMETIMES option, about 30% of teachers reported that they sometimes used Arabic to explain vocabulary, develop rapport and a good classroom atmosphere, and explain meanings.

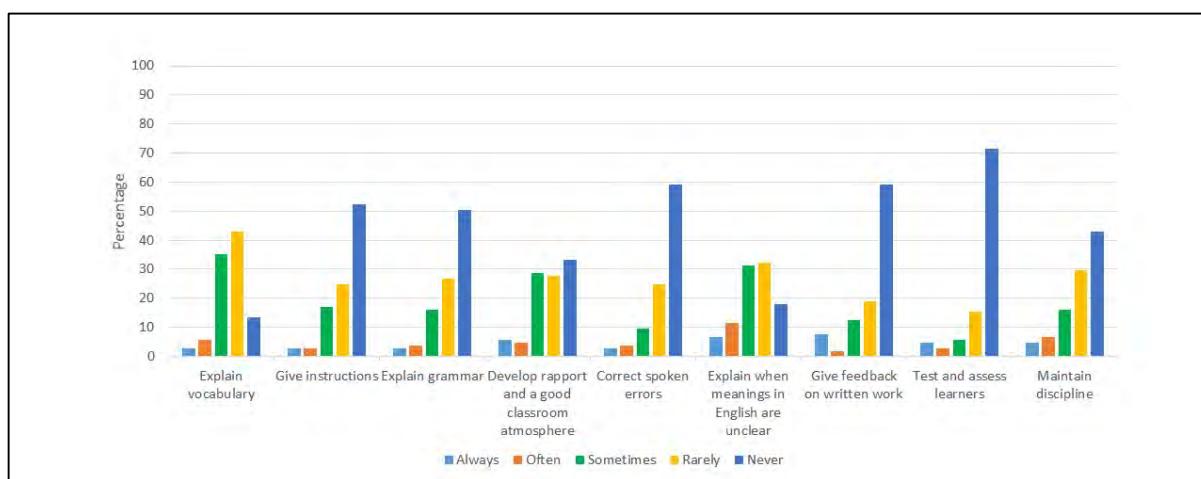


Figure 3: Frequency of L1 use by EFL teachers

During the interviews, the teachers talked about the functions of using L1 in the classroom and stated that they used L1 when needed. The main area that they reported using it in was explaining vocabulary, in particular adjectives and abstract words that cannot be drawn on the board or shown in a picture to explain their meanings. All the teachers said they needed to use L1 for this function, which supports the results from the questionnaire as the top function for L1 use was stated as explaining vocabulary. Teacher A said "...mostly for translating words... because in module 3 and 4 especially this module they [students] are very weak".

Most teachers also reported that they used L1 directly, by first using the L2 and then translating what they had said into Arabic. One of the teachers was unable to speak Arabic and so stated

that she tended to ask one of her students to translate. Teacher D, who does not speak Arabic, stated:

...personally I don't use Arabic but I seek help from my students... first I will ask the student in general can you repeat what I say... ..then I ask her to translate... especially for the vocabulary. (Teacher D)

Another teacher was against using L1 (she is a native Arabic speaker), and reported that she never used Arabic, but that she did encourage her students to use online bilingual dictionaries to translate vocabulary they did not understand. She reported:

...if they are asking about simple word...usually I tell them to use their phone to use google translation ...Arabic/English translation... I do not use Arabic in the class... (Teacher C)

The teachers also spoke about their reasons for their using L1 in their classes. All of them said that they needed to use it for beginner students who cannot understand explanations in English. Teacher B said:

...sometimes for the vocabulary, I have to explain something and they are unable to understand ... I try my best to [help] them to comprehend in L2 ... but the thing is sometimes we feel the need ... so maybe there is one student in the class ... I say what do you call it in Arabic and all of a sudden she said something in Arabic and they get the idea ...[the students will realize] OK she is talking about this thing. (Teacher B)

Besides using L1 for beginner students, most of the teachers interviewed mentioned the following three points as reasons for using L1: (1) helping them to develop a good relationship with their students; (2) enabling students to feel close to them by speaking one or two words in Arabic, which helped to create a pleasant classroom atmosphere; and (3) as pointed out by three of the teachers, L1 is used as a resource to teach English when needed. Teacher E stated:

...students feel detached when you talk English all the time ... or when they cannot understand and you insist on speaking in English and you do not even try to help them ... I have read also about the positive effect for their learning if you use it [L1] wisely. (Teacher E)

### **3.2 RQ2: How frequently do students use their L1 in the EFL classroom?**

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which L1 was used by their students. As Figure 4 shows, the survey responses suggested that students tended to use their L1 for the functions presented to teachers in the questionnaire.

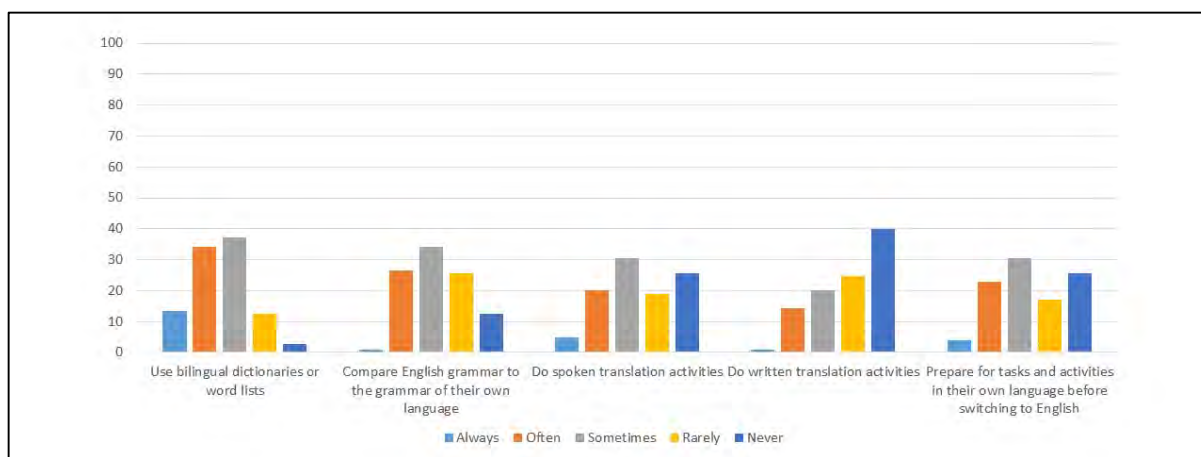


Figure 4: Frequency of L1 use by learners

The teachers reported that the majority of their students used L1 to some extent in the classroom, with the top function being for translating vocabulary using dictionaries. It was also apparent that a large percentage of students used L1 for comparing English grammar to Arabic grammar, and also to prepare for certain tasks. During the interviews, the teachers confirmed the results of the questionnaire by reiterating that L1 was used to check the meaning of a word in the dictionary and to discuss tasks (for example, speaking or writing), whereby in pairs or groups the students used L1 to seek clarification from their peers. Teacher A gave an example of this: "...if I tell them do interviews ... they will sit down and discuss it in Arabic ... and write it in English but they will discuss it in Arabic."

### 3.3 RQ3: What are teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1?

The third research question relates to teachers' attitudes towards using L1. To examine these attitudes, the questionnaire included items that examined five aspects: (1) teachers' general attitudes towards L1 use; (2) teachers' evaluations of the arguments supporting L1 use; (3) teachers' evaluations of the arguments against L1 use; (4) teachers' opinions about which groups of learners' L1 use is appropriate; and (5) teachers' perceptions of ELT training in relation to L1 use. In Figures 5–9, the blue coding relates to the levels of agreement (slightly agree, agree, and strongly agree), which have been collapsed to represent an overall view of agreement. The orange sections relate to the levels of disagreement (slightly disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree; also condensed).



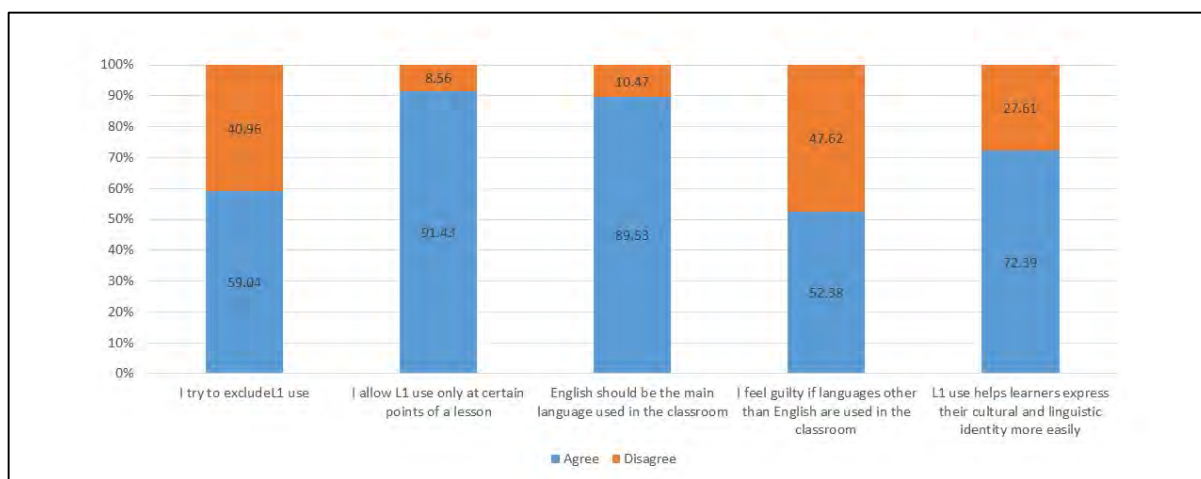


Figure 5: EFL teachers' general views of L1 use in classroom

Figure 5 represents the teachers' general attitudes towards L1 use. It shows that the majority of teachers (about 90%) allowed L1 use at certain points of the lesson, while at the same time about 90% thought that English should be the main language used in class. In addition, 52.38% of the teachers reported feeling guilty when using L1 in the EFL classroom. Although almost 70% of teachers believed that L1 helps their students to express their cultural and linguistic identity, 60% supported excluding L1 use in the classroom. Figure 6 shows the teachers' evaluations of arguments supporting the use of L1.

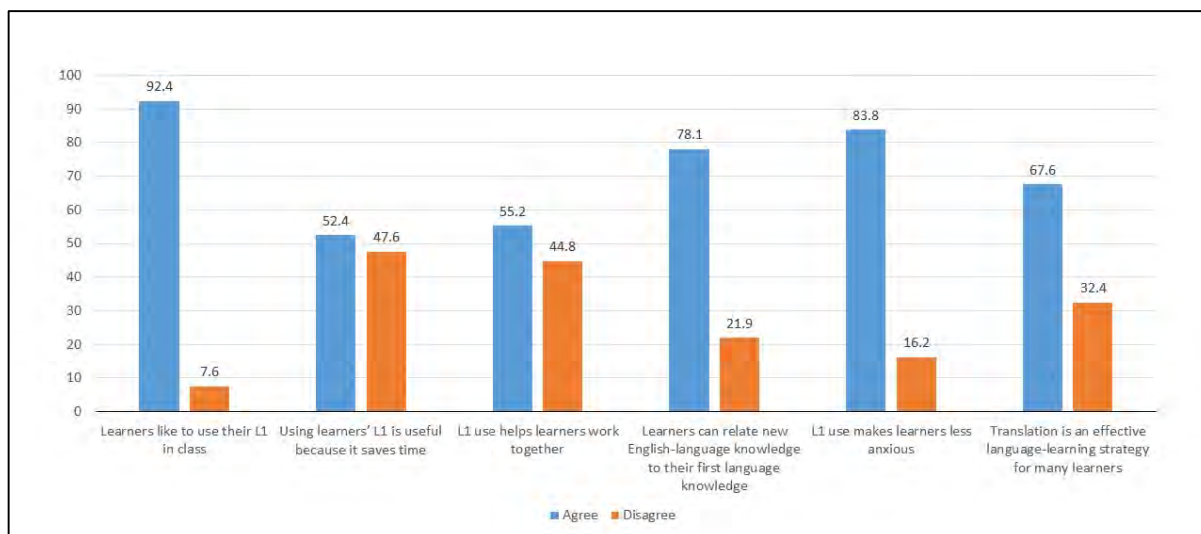


Figure 6: Teachers' evaluations of arguments supporting L1 use

The data presented in Figure 6 shows that most teachers are in agreement with three points: (1) learners like using their L1 (which has the highest percentage at 92%), (2) L1 use reduces students' anxiety levels (83.8%), which are both emotional responses, and (3) students can relate new L2 knowledge to their existing L1 knowledge, such as with grammar, and make connections between the two – which relates to cognitive skill. The highest level of disagreement was found for the second point, which pertains to using L1 to save time. It seems that teachers were more in agreement with psychological and cognitive reasons for using L1 than with practical reasons for its use, such as saving time.

Four of the teachers interviewed highlighted a need to use L1 at certain points during class. One teacher referred to L1 use as a natural occurrence amongst speakers with the same mother tongue. She said:

...we can't be against using L1, it's natural ... even if I meet someone who speaks Urdu ... all of the sudden ... although I am working in such an environment where we use English ... all of the sudden we also switch from L2 to L1 ... it's natural. (Teacher B)

Teacher A stated that L1 is useful for “vocabulary and single words”.

Figure 7 shows the teachers' evaluations of arguments against L1 use.

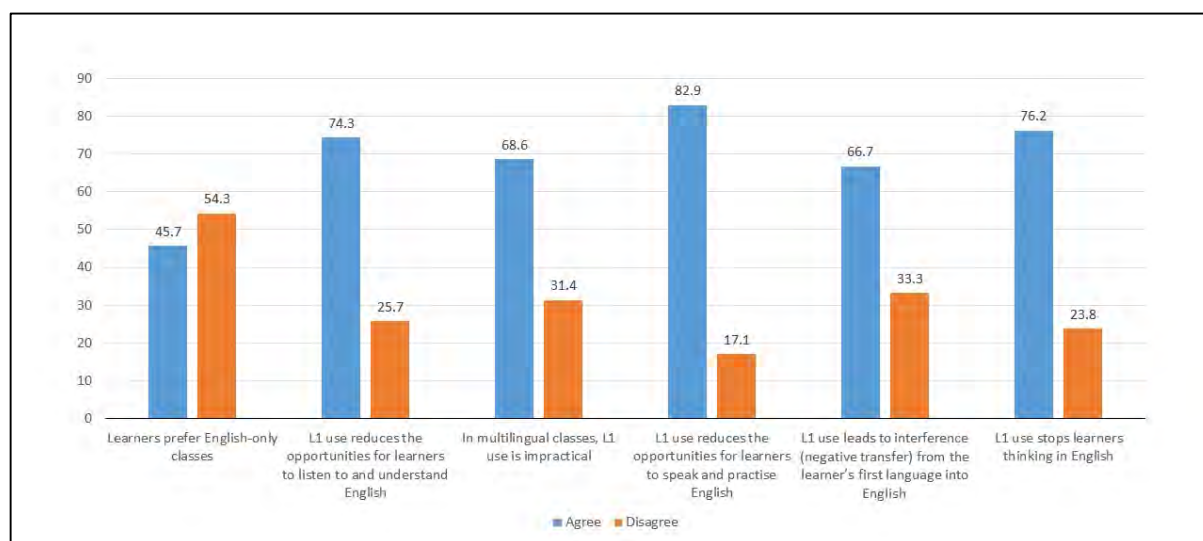


Figure 7: Teachers' evaluations of arguments against L1 use

It can be seen from Figure 7 that the majority of teachers (more than 74%) believed that using L1 reduces students' chances to practise the L2 skills of speaking and listening, which may have a negative impact on whether they think in English. The highest disagreement level shown here was for the first point, which relates to learners' preference to use L2 only in their classroom; 54.3% of teachers disagreed with this.

During the interviews, one teacher stated being against L1 use based on her belief that using English only is better for the learning outcomes of her students. She said: “Actually I don't tell them I am Saudi and I speak Arabic ... for their own benefit I am doing this ... we want them to learn the language ... they are here to learn English” (Teacher C).

Another aspect that was examined was teachers' attitudes towards which groups of students' L1 use is appropriate, the results of which are presented in Figure 8. As with previous figures in this section, the results have been grouped into two viewpoints: agree and disagree.

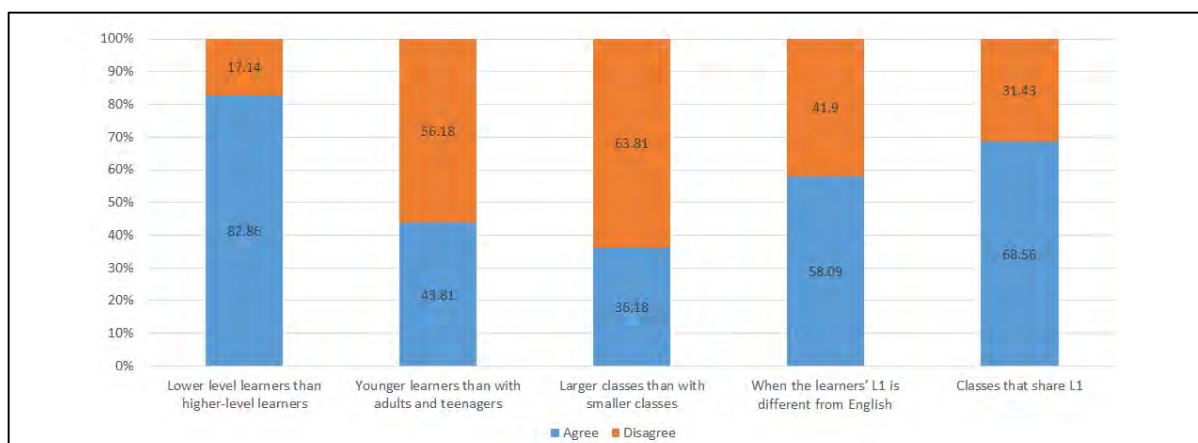


Figure 8: The appropriateness of using L1

Figure 8 shows that the highest percentage of agreement (over 80%) was with the idea that beginners benefit more from the use of L1. Around 60% of teachers believed that L1 use is appropriate in classes that share the same mother tongue. Fewer teachers, about 36%, thought that L1 should be used with larger classes, but not smaller ones.

The last aspect with respect to teacher attitudes pertains to their views of ELT training in relation to L1 use. This includes items related to whether ELT training encourages or discourages L1 use, and whether there is a discussion of L1 use in ELT research.

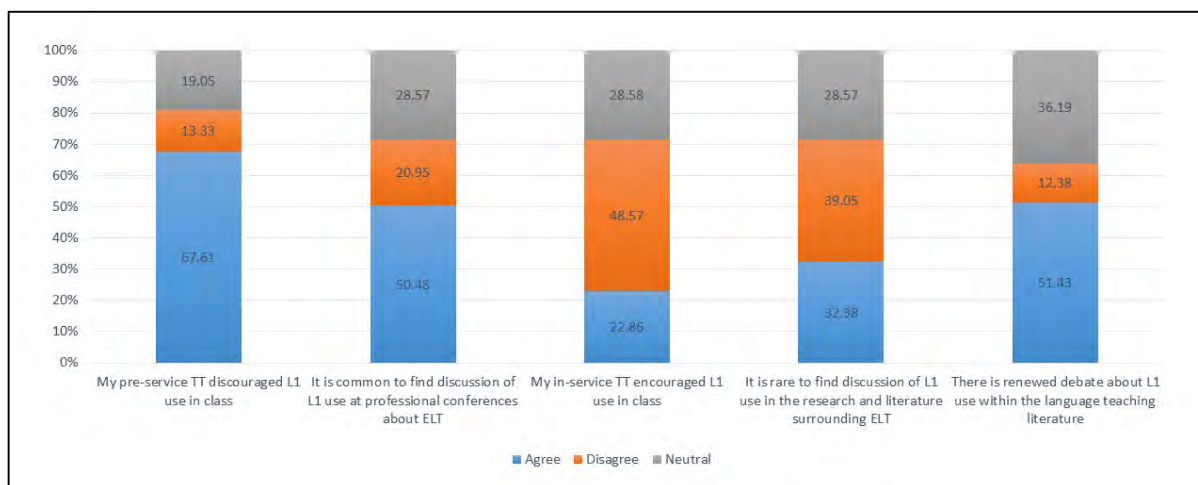


Figure 9: Teachers' perceptions of ELT training in relation to L1 use (TT = teacher training)

As shown in Figure 9, about 50% of participants disagreed with the item about L1 use being encouraged in their in-service teacher training (TT); in fact, 67% agreed that their pre-service TT discouraged L1 use. Around half of the teachers, however, were aware that there is current discussion about L1 use in ELT research and at ELT conferences.

During the interviews, four of the five teachers conveyed that their TT very much discouraged the use of L1 in the classroom. One teacher stated "I was always against it before because we were always told no Arabic in class" Teacher B, but went on to say that she attended a Cambridge course recently where it was suggested that L1 use is fine where the class shares

the same L1. Some interviewees said that they would have liked to see TT discussing L1 use and the ways in which it can be used, as they did use L1 to perform certain functions.

#### **4 Discussion**

Within the context of this study, most of the EFL teachers revealed that they allowed the use of L1 to some extent in their classroom. L1 is mainly used for explaining vocabulary, clarifying unclear meaning and building a good relationship with students. Teachers showed their belief that, when used appropriately, L1 use can enhance L2 learning. This mirrors the findings of previous research in other contexts (Hall & Cook, 2013; McMillan & Rivers, 2011), which has found that English teachers do use L1 in the classroom to perform a number of functions. Hall and Cook (2013) found that most of the participants in their study reported using L1 to explain vocabulary, grammar, and unclear meanings. They also indicated a role of L1 in developing rapport. McMillan and Rivers (2011) pointed to teachers' belief that the use of L1 in a selective way could enhance L2 learning.

In the present study, the majority of students used L1 to some extent in the classroom. As reported by teachers, they mainly used L1 for translating vocabulary using dictionaries, for comparing English grammar to Arabic grammar, and to prepare for certain tasks. The finding of this study is aligned with previous studies (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez Jiménez, 2004; Hall & Cook, 2013). They all reported the use of L1 for translating new words, preparing for tasks, and to scaffold L2 communication in language learning situations. Furthermore, the current study findings indicated that the two groups of students who can most appropriately use L1 are lower-level English language learners and learners who share the same L1. In fact, banning L1 use was found practically impossible with these two groups (Nunan and Lamb, 1996).

The teachers, in this study, also believed that English should be the main language used in EFL classrooms, showing their awareness of the benefits of maximizing the use of L2 and providing models of real language use of L2. This result supports the finding of Hall and Cook's study (2013), they find that, in general, teachers agree that the use of English should be maximised, but they also indicate learners' L1 can be used in classrooms to some extent. However, Hall and Cook (2013) refer to the need to study the appropriate amount of L1 use in classrooms.

The findings also showed teachers' belief that most of their teacher training has not encouraged L1 use. Relevant teacher training should introduce the benefits of L1 and a framework clarifying the functions of using L1. This might help teachers adapt L1 use to their context in a principled manner, and free them from the sense of guilt reported in the findings of this study and previous research (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Littlewood & Yu, 2011).

#### **5 Conclusion**

This research examined the use of L1 by EFL teachers and their attitudes towards L1 use in the context of higher education. It also investigated the use of L1 by students as reported by their teachers. The findings reveal that teachers believe that English should be the main language used in the classroom. The results also show that teachers use L1 for some functions in EFL classes, such as explaining vocabulary and developing rapport with students. Teachers also report that the majority of their students use L1 mainly for translating new vocabulary and preparing for tasks. In addition, teachers note that teacher-training generally does not encourage the use of L1.

The study findings suggest some implications for EFL teachers, ELT research and training. EFL teachers should feel free to use learners' L1 to serve learning functions. That is not to say that they should endorse unlimited use of L1. As for ELT training and research, there appears to be a need to introduce a framework that clearly identifies both how and when to use L1. Such a framework could serve several pedagogical functions, and make the use of L1 more appropriate by outlining where L1 can be used effectively. ELT training should raise teachers' awareness of the practical benefits of using L1. This might help to free teachers from feeling guilty when a language other than English is used in the classrooms.

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